

ON THE QUEST FOR DIVERSITY

Bruce Peterson, Middlebury College

This college, like most I know, is bent upon attracting a more diverse student body. Yet every day the search for diversity becomes more confused. We want it, but we aren't sure why. Not many on this nation's campuses, whose embrace of diversity is wholehearted, have given the matter real thought. We accept without challenge the notions that diversity is good, and that many institutions are not diverse enough.

Contradictions riddle our approach to the problem. Students as a group want diversity. As individuals they conform. Faculties seek diversity in each new freshman class without acknowledging the incontrovertible conclusion that greater diversity (of any kind) must mean smaller emphasis on other factors, including academic talent. The boards and legislatures which enjoin us to address the matter seem poorly informed about the actual situation. In their actions and attitudes they represent the colleges quite faithfully.

Increasing the number of students from working class backgrounds is a worthy goal become suddenly fashionable. I suspect we will be judged successful, however, only when we enroll more students whose working class backgrounds are identifiable, and that, in my opinion, is not a worthy goal.

Like most Americans, mine was once a working class family. Like most Americans I am proud of that and fervently hope that the nation can remain true to its dream, that people can continue to rise on the basis of ability. But rising from the working class is not a spectator sport. Why should students from struggling families have to demonstrate that fact? If we believe in what we are, then it's altogether encouraging that people on the way up aspire to be and to look like those who, by some measure, are already there.

We will not soon solve the "problem," not because students from working class backgrounds won't come to college, but because the people who will judge us won't be able to tell they are here. I would be delighted if we could double the number of less affluent students without the campus ever noticing. Much of the problem is perception, and therefore much of the solution must address perception.

What we really want on our campuses are members of visible minority groups -- blacks, Puerto Ricans, Asians, etc. Here in the Northeast we could dramatically increase our minority presence by targeting the French Canadian population just across our border. Yet we have never done this, perhaps because virtually no one would consider French Canadians a "real" minority.

We have been reluctant to admit that, for most of the past 20 years, diversity has been synonymous with black. Emphasizing one racial group over others sounds like (and is) racism. Recently diversity has come to include Hispanics and Asians. Italians and Irish and Jews and Poles, however, no longer seem to count in the search.

Reasons for this lie in the history of the civil rights movement, in the awakening of the country's conscience, in the dramatic migrations following the Southeast Asian wars. More important, however, may be the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation. In the long run the sense of pride in Black history and culture may prove much the most valuable product of the civil rights movement, and a parallel pride has found expression in other minorities, including especially the Hispanics. Every group must ride the American dream to inclusion in our society without denying a distinctive and nurturing cultural heritage. How that can happen seems almost incomprehensible, yet happen it does. I retain almost no sense of Swedish or French or Chippewa cultural identity. I think of myself as an American. Somewhere years back, my grandparents swapped one culture for a new one.

A sense of ethnic identification has been for some an essential step on the way toward assimilation and for others a permanent stage in their integration into a pluralistic society. There was a time when the American working class sought assimilation. For some that still seems the end, albeit not a conscious goal. Asians and Cubans moving through our colleges and universities often seem bent upon the values and material acquisitions which signify success in America. We actually hear complaints that they don't, "contribute to the cultural life of the community," which apparently means that they move too easily in American society or that their ethnicity remains a private concern. We in the majority lose track of their separateness and, perversely, resent it.

In contrast, Black and Puerto Rican students, perhaps because of physical identifiability, may appear to guard their cultural identities more zealously. Precisely because their ethnicity is so public, they may seem to those in the majority somewhat clannish and removed.

Of course generalizations about groups of students are stereotypes and carry with them no information about any individuals. In any case, neither pattern of behavior is wrong or hard to understand. Every group aspires to a greater role in American society, and every group seeks to preserve its ethnic identity. They only choose different emphases.

Illustrative of the colleges' dilemma is the campus reaction to ethnic groups. Blacks and Hispanics are accepted as exemplars of diversity. Asians, at least on many campuses, have become no different from Italians or Jews, groups we simply don't think of when we speak of diversity. Because of strong cultural differences, Cuban students may act very differently from Puerto Ricans and Chicanos. I suspect that the colleges will shortly cease to pay much attention to the presence of Cuban students on campus, because they are so successful in all the traditional ways. If that is what they want, all to the good.

Why do we want to educate minority students? Why does the same society which seeks to exclude them in so many ways go out of its way to attract them to its campuses? Part of the answer may lie in our preference for the simplicity of institutional solutions which free us from personal commitment. I am not so cynical about us, however. I believe most Americans still dream and want others to share in the opportunity.

One reason for bringing minority students to campus, and, I suspect, the important reason on many campuses, is to educate mainstream American students about their own society. We don't want our white children to go through college without knowing blacks and Hispanics and foreign students (although we may not want them in our neighborhoods.) We are uncomfortable with tokenism. We believe it is our duty to mirror a complex society on our campuses. A minority is not truly represented by any group too small to carry with it a cultural identity larger than that of any individual in the group.

A better reason for seeking a minority presence on the campus is an honest desire to serve society. We know what education has done for us and we want others to have the same chance.

We hope our motives are pure and altruistic, but neither of these explanations for the value we place on diversity is satisfactory. We are the educators. We should offer education to our minority students, not ask them to serve as the faculty in a societal classroom. They should come to college

for their reasons, not to serve ends which have more to do with our consciences. If we are motivated solely by altruism, then we might better turn our efforts toward supporting the black colleges, which, for many minority students, may be better choices.

Of course the story is not that simple. Our students are individual human beings first and parts of a complex society second. As institutions, we deliberately limit our interference in their lives. We don't guarantee equality of experience to every applicant, but we believe fervently in equality of opportunity. We should not bring minority students here to educate our white students, but neither should we segregate them and prevent that confrontation with difference which leads inevitably to growth. We should not improperly woo a minority student who might be better suited for another institution, but neither should we prevent a qualified student from choosing us, for whatever reasons he or she may have.

We can justify our search for greater diversity by the opportunity we offer to our students. While I can not claim that we do a better job with whole segments of society, I know there are many for whom no place will do a better job than we will. If by finding these students and teaching them well we create a more exemplary campus, then we have served our college and our society well. But let's be clear, when we bring to campus a student who is disadvantaged or different in any way, we should do so because we know that for that student, there is no better place to be.

BBP/sl